



Meet the Author: Brian Cookson

London Historians meets Brian Cookson, the author of Crossing the River: The History of London's Thames Bridges from Richmond to the Tower.



I understand your first career was in the computer business. How did you switch to become a Blue Badge Guide and writer?

Having taken early retirement at 55, I wanted to do something completely different from computing. By chance, a friend mentioned the Blue Badge Guide training course. It sounded really interesting, so I applied and was accepted on the course partly because I had once been fluent in Russian. When I qualified I found that my Russian was rusty, but my enthusiasm for the history and culture of London had been aroused. My problem was that there were too many English speaking guides doing the general tourist work, so I decided to specialise in guided London walks. I now have a portfolio of over 100 walks throughout London.

What is it about the Thames specifically that sparked your interest?

When I used to do some general London coach tours, I found the excitement built up whenever we emerged from the traffic jams in the centre of London to see the Thames and its bridges dominate the landscape. I would even start my introduction to the City with the words 'London is here because of the Thames'. Later as I developed my walking tours, I found that there is so much variety in the Thames riverscape, from the rural beauty of Richmond to the world famous views in the central area and to the wide expanse of the industrial stretch to the east.

How long did it take you to research and write *Crossing the River*?

The publisher set a deadline for me to produce the draft version within one year. This was a challenge which I only just met. It then took two months to complete the indexing, editing and references. Much of the research involved visiting the riverside London Borough Local History Libraries, which are a mine of information. The Guildhall Library is of course the prime repository of literature on all aspects of London and provided me with many of the historical illustrations. For original historical documents, such as Acts of Parliament and contemporary accounts I used the British Library. I was impressed that anyone who has a desire to do their own research can get a reader's ticket, although it certainly is easier if one is writing a book or doing research for an educational establishment.

Do you have a favourite bridge on the Thames?

Albert Bridge. This is beautiful, especially at night. Also the engineering is interesting in that it is a cable stayed structure. Many of the world's longest bridges now use this method of supporting a crossing, and Albert Bridge was the first to do so. Unfortunately, the technology in the 19th Century did not meet the aspirations of the engineer, R.M. Ordish, and his bridge has for some time caused problems. Ironically, the famous sign demanding that troops must break step before crossing the bridge stands near the offices of Norman Foster, the architect of the Millennium Bridge, fondly known as the 'wobbly bridge'. Obviously he never walked that way.



Albert Bridge (1873).

Who is your favourite bridge architect or engineer?

Sir Joseph Bazalgette is best known for his sewage system. He also designed three bridges, all of which still stand – Putney Bridge, Battersea Bridge and the quirkiest of all London's Thames bridges, Hammersmith Bridge. Brunel also designed the first Hungerford Bridge, which was a suspension footbridge. This did not last long, but the chains were reused for his Clifton suspension bridge. John Rennie would have been my favourite, but none of his three Thames bridges remain today. All were groundbreaking in their time. Southwark Bridge had the longest spans in the world when constructed in 1819. His Waterloo Bridge was described by Canova as the most beautiful bridge in the world, but was sadly pulled down by Herbert Morrison when he was the leader of the L.C.C. Rennie's London Bridge of course does still stand, but in Arizona. Its replacement unfortunately is a bit of an eyesore.

If you had the power and funds, what sort of bridge would you add to the London Thames today and where would you place it?

Ideas for a Thames Gateway bridge in the area to the east of Woolwich have been thrown around for at least 10 years. I would like to see a combined road and rail bridge built here using the latest cable stay technology. Newcastle has had a combined arch and suspension bridge for this purpose since 1849, and it is time London followed suit.

Do you have any advice for a budding history writer working on their first book?

First, have a fascination and enthusiasm for the subject. Second, be prepared for a hard slog – exhausting all possible sources in many different places. Some librarians are really helpful, but occasionally it is much harder to find what you are looking for. Finally, the real tedium sets in when adding appendices of references, and checking that all your facts tie up. Here the publisher's assigned editor can be very useful and surprisingly knowledgeable (I suppose partly because of the internet!). I have omitted the biggest problem, which is getting an agent to promote your idea to publishers. I was fortunate in that a best selling author came on one of my walks, and put me in touch with her agent. Without that I am not sure I would have ventured into authorship.

About Brian Cookson

Brian Cookson is the author of *Crossing the River* and *London's Waterside Walks*. Brian is a Registered Blue Guide and will give London Historians members a £35.00 discount off group bookings (£90.00 instead of £125.00). Contact us for details.